



New report and focus groups address troubling findings about state's girls

At the end of Monday's press conference heralding the release of [a report on the state of Minnesota girls](#), a man raised his hand and reiterated a number of the points the study's authors had just made:

Compared with boys, girls are more likely to live in poverty, experience physical or sexual abuse and homelessness, more likely to blunt their pain with drugs or alcohol, and to suffer from depression and low self-esteem.

The disparity is generations old, the questioner noted. Why were these problems still so pervasive?



The women presenting the research might as well have drafted the question and planted the asker. Indeed, Minneapolis Foundation President and CEO Sandra Vargas grinned as she pretended to shove Rep. Neva Walker, DFL-Minneapolis, out of the way so she could get to the podium.

Biggest challenge is breaking negative cycle

Disadvantaged girls are often the daughters of women who themselves endured an inequitable start to life, Walker, Vargas, and the other leaders explained. If nothing's done at a policy level, the current generation risks growing up to head families that repeat the cycle.

"I'm going to blame the press and policymakers," Walker said. "We have known this for years, but we never really get to the core of why that is."

Poverty rates among boys and girls under 18 in Minnesota, 2005



Source: U.S. Dept of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 2006

Conducted by the Women's Foundation of Minnesota and the Washington, D.C.-based Institute for Women's Policy Research, the report on the status of the state's girls [contained mixed news](#). On the whole, by economic, social, and educational measures, Minnesota's

white girls are doing well. Minorities, however, are faring far worse.

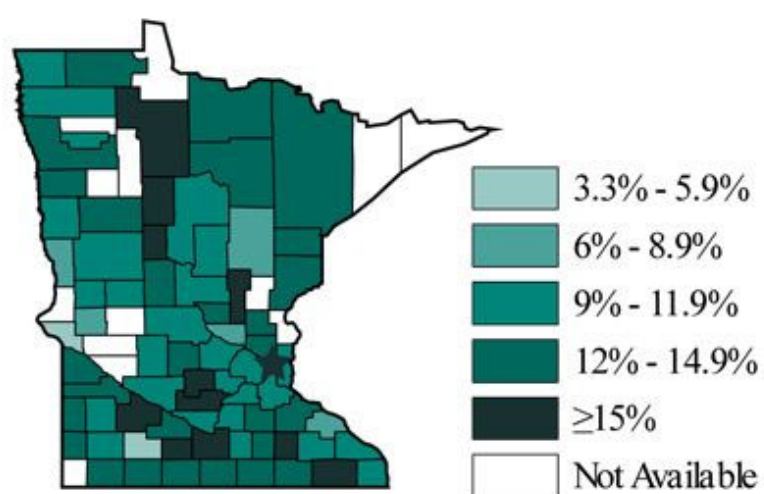
While 7 percent of white girls lived in poverty in 2005, more than 43 percent of African-American girls did. Almost as many American Indian girls were impoverished, as were 27 percent of Hispanic girls. Only among Asian-Americans did more boys than girls live in poverty.

The disparity widens as the girls grow up, and worsens again when they start their own families. In 2005, more than 60 percent of poor families were female-headed; among African-Americans, the figure was 71 percent.

Girls are also more likely to be abused. One in four American Indian girls reported abuse, as did one in five African-Americans.

"American Indian girls are being trafficked into the sex business every day in Minnesota," said Suzanne Koeplinger, executive director of the Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center. "And yet no one really seems to be paying attention to this problem."

Percentage of Minnesota girls who have ever attempted suicide



Source: Minnesota Student Survey Interagency Team 2005

Girls' self-worth issues worsen with age

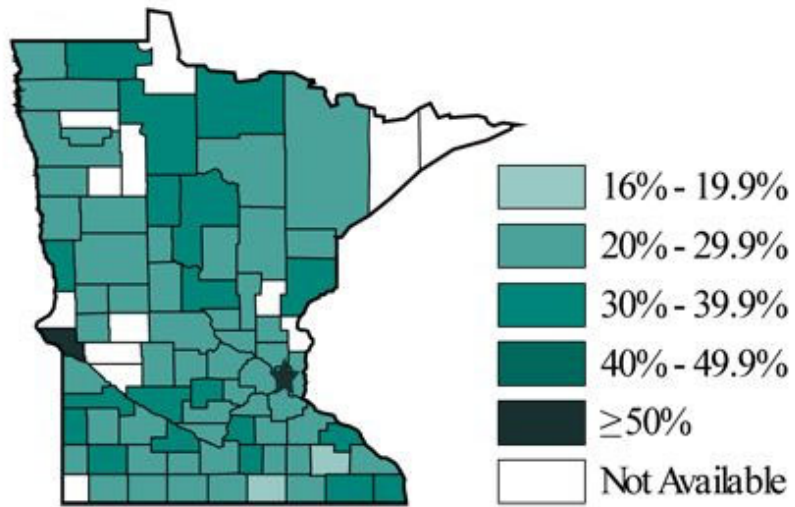
In terms of self-worth, girls of all races are significantly less likely to say they feel good about themselves and more likely to feel they are "no good."

"On the whole, Minnesota's girls feel worse about themselves than boys do," said Walker. "Whereas boys' self-esteem gradually increases from sixth to ninth to 12th grade, girls' self-esteem dramatically drops in ninth grade."

Still, Minnesota's girls study harder and have higher educational aspirations than boys. And yet to judge by standardized tests, fewer are prepared to go on to college, the report found. The study's authors attribute this to stereotypes about math and science.

Girls are working harder at home, too. "Girls are performing a balancing act in adolescence," said Vargas. "They work, they do more work at home, they have more responsibilities." This is particularly true for Latinas and African-Americans.

Percentage of girls reporting alcohol use in the past month



Source: Minnesota Student Survey Interagency Team 2005

In recent decades, schools and other public institutions have made great strides toward egalitarianism, she and the other leaders said. But girls' needs still aren't being addressed on a policy level.

"They're not getting a supportive message from the system they're interacting with every day," added Vargas. "After a while, when you get the message you don't have a lot of meaning in a community, you're going to internalize that message."

The first step is to fund the social and educational services girls and their mothers need to work their way out of poverty, she said. "Our systems are punitive. I can tell you there are million-dollar families in Hennepin County and every other county because we don't have the political will to fund prevention."

The first effort of its kind for the 25-year-old Women's Foundation, the report contains policy recommendations. In addition, its authors have scheduled more than a dozen focus groups across the state during which they will present the data to elected officials and community leaders. The "Road to Equality Tour" begins May 5 in Marshall; several metro-area meetings will take place May 15 and 16 and in June and July.